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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A Point About Intelligence-Gathering

Richard Harwood's excellent article on the shortcomings of U.S. intelligence ["Agents Overshadowed by the Bureaucrats," front page, Dec. 8] is marred by one omission: He does not mention the problem of audience receptivity, or lack thereof.

The information an intelligence agency transmits is apprehended by its intended audience only within certain limited intellectually and emotionally established parameters. Just as data implying that the world is round rather than flat were lost on mankind until modern science wore down our forefathers' resistance, so does much intelligence go unheard because the policy-makers are ill-disposed to receive it.

The reverse of that proposition is that intelligence agencies are not encouraged to collect information that runs contrary to policy-makers' views. Rather more than most governmental

organizations, those that purvey intelligence abhor controversy; it damages their cherished reputation for omniscience and impairs their "good old boy" approach to marketing their product.

Mountains of intelligence "requirements" are issued each year, but I doubt that there has ever been one specifically requesting proof that the Soviets have no intention of launching a first-strike nuclear attack. And if by chance intelligence to that effect were to come our way spontaneously, not only would it be regarded with deep suspicion by the policy-makers, but various eminent retired intelligence officers would fill the Washington air with cries of "disinformation."

Certain beliefs are convenient, others are not, and it is convenience rather than wisdom that often determines the collection and analysis of intelligence. Look at Mr. Harwood's

own examples of unpredicted catastrophes. The Truman administration chose to conclude that the threat from North Korea was minimal because only that assumption (and similar ones for other parts of the world) would make possible a rapid and drastic demobilization of the U.S. armed forces. As to the sad end of the shah of Iran, any intelligence officer at the time who had presented the president's staff with a prediction of imminent imperial demise would have been greeted with the standard angry riposte of the Nixon coterie when faced by unwelcome news: "The president won't stand for it!"

Intelligence, like any other commodity, is subject to market forces; but alas, the best price prescience can command is often very low.

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